

Statement by Congressman Curt Weldon (PA-07)
House Budget Committee
March 8, 2001
re: Crucial Funding for America's Firefighters

First of all, I would like to thank Chairman Nussle for allowing me to speak today. The chairman, like me, is a former firefighter, and I know him to be an individual who is deeply committed to providing our nation's first responders with the means necessary to do their job. And their job is, of course, to protect us all, at great risk to themselves.

Chairman Nussle's leadership this year will be critical to the success of the fire service. I look forward to working with him in the future on this issue.

Last year, Congress passed unprecedented legislation designed to help needy local fire departments. Attached to the FY2001 Defense Authorization bill, this legislation established a grant program to be administered by FEMA. These grants would be awarded based on need, and would go directly to local departments, bypassing intermediate bureaucracies. The grant program was authorized at \$100 million for FY2001 and \$300 million for FY2002. Another major victory was had when we achieved the full \$100 million appropriation last year, and cash-starved fire departments nationwide are eagerly awaiting FEMA's implementation of the program. The application process is expected to begin in April.

Unfortunately, President Bush's recently released budget blueprint did not include funding for the program in FY2002. It based this decision on the rationale that this is a local responsibility, not a federal one. While there was a time that this may have been true, such is no longer the case. Fire companies are becoming increasingly involved in the planned response to terrorist attacks and potential events involving weapons of mass destruction. Our brave firefighters are referred to as first responders for a reason, whether it be a fire or an earthquake, a terrorist attack or a rescue operation, firefighters, often volunteers, are the first on the scene. The situations to which they respond are often federally managed, and yet fire departments have been neglected by the federal government. Last year we changed that. This year, as we anticipate massive spending increases in traditionally local matters such as education, let us not turn our backs on the 32,000 fire departments nationwide, and 1 million firefighters who serve them. Let us not forget the 100 people every year who suit up in their firefighting gear, and never come home. They **are** our responsibility.

There can be no doubt that our nation's first responders are in dire need of help. Many volunteer fire departments face a manpower crisis. Even worse, declining budgets force many firefighters to put their lives on the line with aging and outdated equipment. New responsibilities and larger populations mean that we are asking them to do more with less. At the same time, fire service personnel have to hold pot-luck dinners to pay for equipment, or have to stand on street corners holding the donation boot to keep fire trucks

running. This simply is not right. Would we ask the police or the military to submit to this?

I am proud to support the grant program for our local fire companies, and my discussions with other members lead me to believe that this support is very widespread. This is not a partisan matter. Republicans and Democrats alike contributed to this program's realization. My good friend Steny Hoyer has been a great partner over the years in helping to promote congressional awareness of the needs of the fire service, and Members on both sides helped us achieve victory last year.

Local fire departments serve every town in every congressional district in America. In many communities, the fire station is the center of civic participation. I urge all members of this committee to support full funding for the firefighter assistance program. It's time to answer our firefighters' call for help, as they have done for us for so long.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for letting me appear before you today.